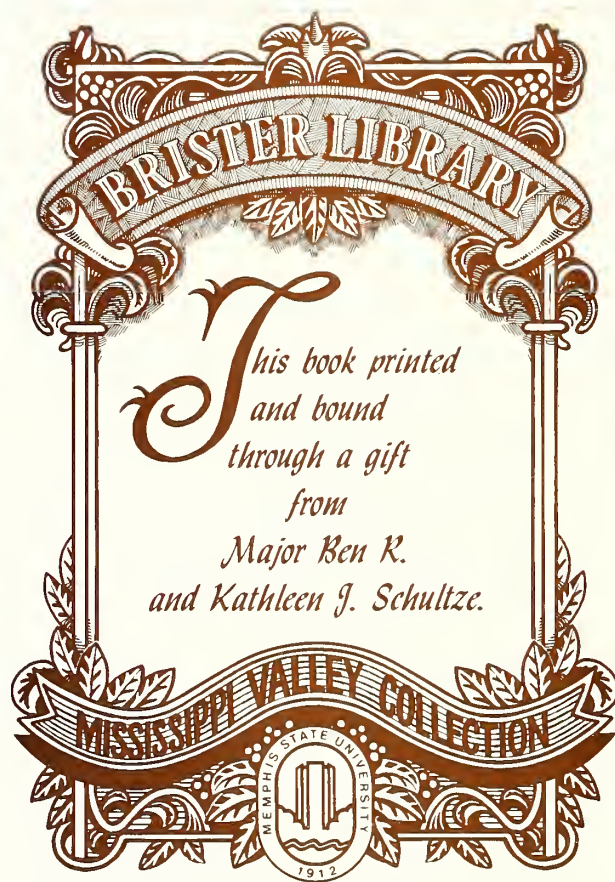


HISTORY OF THE MEMPHIS BELLE  
INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET POLK

BY SUSAN CARLISLE ELLIOTT  
ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE  
MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY





29063001

DHT 10/15/93



UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS LIBRARIES  
3 2109 00699 7929

From La P t e i o n Histoire de l'Amérique, 1722

Mississippi Valley Collection  
UE1242 B6 E45x 1989







HISTORY OF THE MEMPHIS BELLE

INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET POLK

OCTOBER 24, 1989

BY SUSAN CARLISLE ELLIOTT

TRANSCRIBER: SUSAN CARLISLE ELLIOTT

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE

MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY





MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE

I hereby release all right, title, or interest in and to all of my tape-recorded memoirs to the Mississippi Valley Archives of the John Willard Brister Library of Memphis State University and declare that they may be used without any restriction whatsoever and may be copyrighted and published by the said Archives, which also may assign said copyright and publication rights to serious research scholars.

PLACE 35 Patricia, Memphis, TN

DATE October 24, 1989

Susan Carlisle - Elliott

(INTERVIEWEE)

Margaret Polk

(For the Mississippi Valley Archives  
of the John Willard Brister Library  
of Memphis State University)



THIS IS THE ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE OF MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY. THE PROJECT IS "HISTORY OF THE MEMPHIS BELLE." THE DATE IS OCTOBER 24, 1989. THE PLACE IS MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE. THE INTERVIEW IS WITH MS. MARGARET POLK. THE INTERVIEW IS CONDUCTED AND TRANSCRIBED BY SUSAN CARLISLE ELLIOTT. INTERVIEW I.

MS. ELLIOTT: We are in the home of Margaret Polk and, Ms. Polk, if we could I'd like to begin talking about your parents and your early life. What did your father do?

MS. POLK: He was a lawyer but he also ran a plantation.

MS. ELLIOTT: Where was the plantation?

MS. POLK: Well, there was one out in Tennessee, near Hickory Valley, Tennessee. Then he had some new land over in Arkansas that he was going to clear. So a lot of times he was gone, most of the time. You know back then living on a farm you started working from daylight to past dark and you had to be there.

MS. ELLIOTT: Your parents names were?

MS. POLK: My daddy was Oscar Boyle Polk. My mother was (pause). We called her Bessie Rob. She was from Indiana. Her real name was Mary Elizabeth but



everybody knew her as Bessie.

2

MS. ELLIOTT: Was your father from here in Memphis?

MS. POLK: Yes. It was kind of an old family I think. I don't know. The old house used to be two doors east of St. Peter's Church. You know there is St. Peter's Catholic Church, then the Magavney House and then our house.

MS. ELLIOTT: And that's where you grew up?

MS. POLK: No, that's where my parents lived. But I grew up at 1095 Poplar. You know where the Four Flames restaurant [is]?

MS. ELLIOTT: I certainly do.

MS. POLK: Well, the parking lot on the east side is the house where I was born and raised.

They moved there in 1922. [On tape, Ms. Polk states the date as 1944. She later gave the correct date.]

MS. ELLIOTT: What year were you born?

MS. POLK: Nineteen twenty-two. December the 15th.

MS. ELLIOTT: So you were born at home. Where did you first go to school?

MS. POLK: I went to the Miraculous School. It was a little two room school house and it had these two old maids and you went up five grades. Miss Emma Cook's school. It was right there at Jefferson and Bellevue. In fact, Bellevue Baptist Church bought this school [property]. One old lady had one room and the other old lady had the other. And you could go from that five grades going





through there to the eighth grade at Miss Hutchison's School.

MS. ELLIOTT: Because of how much they taught you?

MS. POLK: Yes. We didn't have homework because they said "We don't believe in grading the parent's papers." And it was play because those old ladies would get out and play with you. [They would] lift up those skirts and run and play whatever games we used to play. I just remember it as play. But that was really the foundation of my education.

MS. ELLIOTT: Was it hard to go from that [the Miraculous] school to Miss Hutchison's School?

MS. POLK: Well, I went to the seventh grade. Because my older sister went to the eighth grade and she graduated from Smith College at the age of (pause). Let's see, she got out of high school at the age of 15.

MS. ELLIOTT: That's early.

MS. POLK: And then she went up there to Smith and that was just too much for an old country girl so they held me back a year.

MS. ELLIOTT: Did you graduate from Miss Hutchison's School?

MS. POLK: Yes, I graduated from Hutchison. Then I went to Southwestern [College] for two years and then I went one year up at the University of Wisconsin and then I came back to Southwestern. And then I quit in January of my senior year because I thought Bob



[Morgan, my fiancee] was coming home. And I just never have been overly fond of school even though I majored in Science. So after the romance fizzled out then I went back to Southwestern. I finally got my degree out there but never have used it.

MS. ELLIOTT: Were there a lot of social functions at Miss Hutchison's [School] and Southwestern?

MS. POLK: Well, I guess there was. I was in a sorority at Miss Hutchison's. I just never did care about boys or anything. I don't think I really started dating [until] maybe my senior year at Miss Hutchison's. Even at Southwestern I had a couple of boys and we just buddied around.

MS. ELLIOTT: You mentioned an older sister.

MS. POLK: Yes. And then I have an older brother.

MS. ELLIOTT: What are their names?

MS. POLK: Well, they're both dead. My older brother is O.B. Polk, Jr. and he died of Parkinson's disease. He had two children. My sister was the one whose husband was a flight surgeon and I went with her out to Walla Walla, Washington and that's where I met Bob. She had one son but he was killed in Vietnam. She died in 1951.

MS. ELLIOTT: What was her name?

MS. POLK: Elizabeth. Then I have a younger brother, Tommy. He is an Episcopal minister and he lives in Texas.





MS. ELLIOTT: You mentioned the fact that you went with your sister, Elizabeth, to Walla Walla.

Washington. Why did you make that trip?

MS. POLK: Well, they [my sister and brother-in-law] were being transferred from Tampa, Florida. She had to drive from Tampa to Walla Walla because her husband had to be on the troop train. She came through here and wanted me to go and I didn't want to go. I don't know what I was doing but I didn't want to go out there. So Mother promised me a trip to Sun Valley and Yellowstone if I'd drive out there.

MS. ELLIOTT: And it was just you and your sister, Elizabeth?

MS. POLK: And a two bit dog.

MS. ELLIOTT: A dog? (laughter)

MS. POLK: Yes, a Scottie.

MS. ELLIOTT: What summer was this?

MS. POLK: Nineteen forty-two.

MS. ELLIOTT: How long did it take you to drive?

MS. POLK: I don't remember. Two or three days I guess.

MS. ELLIOTT: When you got to Walla Walla, Washington, where did you stay with your sister?

MS. POLK: Yes. We got there and Mac, her husband, had rented this house, but there weren't any lights or gas. We went to the hotel and they wouldn't let that damn dog in. So, we went out to that two bit house



and slept in the dark and it seems to me that we slept on the floor. I don't know but it was terrible. And, darn it, Bob and them, after I met Bob, they had a little old dog in that hotel. I really complained about the unfairness [of it]. But I guess they had snuck the dog in.

MS. ELLIOTT:           You met Robert Morgan then. How did you meet?

MS. POLK:               Well, I don't remember meeting him. But I know in the mornings sometimes if we wanted the car we'd drive Mac out to the Field. Somebody would drive him back and they'd stop in for a drink in the afternoon or Mac would bring somebody back. There were always so many men around there you never did pay any attention one from the other.

Bob had his birthday party and asked me to go and I had a date. You were real popular out there because of all those men and no women. My brother-in-law wouldn't let me go to that birthday party. He said "You don't late date. You're not in college. You're in a man's world now." So he wouldn't let me go.

That brought Bob to my attention, something that I couldn't do. I guess when I didn't show up at Bob's birthday party he became conscious of me. Whether that's his version or not, I don't know. That's the first time I was conscious of Bob.

MS. ELLIOTT:           After that did your brother-in-law or sister have any objections to you dating



Bob?

7

MS. POLK: No, they didn't care who I dated. There I was getting ready to be a senior in college.

MS. ELLIOTT: How old were you?

MS. POLK: That was in '42 so I was 19. So Bob early morning would start flying over the house, buzzing the house, to wake everybody up. But it felt like he was coming through the damn window.

MS. ELLIOTT: And that was just his way of telling you good morning?

MS. POLK: Yes. He's full of the devil I'll tell you but he's a damn good pilot. He can really fly that airplane.

MS. ELLIOTT: How long did you stay there with your sister and brother-in-law?

MS. POLK: I can't remember. I know coming home we went to Chicago to pick up Becky's [a friend's] car. I had this girl from the University of Wisconsin meet me out at West Yellowstone. And we went to West Yellowstone. And I met a [Park] ranger there. Then we went to Sun Valley but then we had to go back to Walla Walla because we were running out of money. Coming back I had to stop off at Yellowstone to see that ranger.

MS. ELLIOTT: So you had met someone else?

MS. POLK: Yes, and that was the one I was conscious of all summer. I think he was going to be





a lawyer.

8

So we stopped at Yellowstone and caught the plane to Chicago and picked up her car. Then we drove down to Memphis. When we got back there was a letter from Bob. And that opened up a can of worms.

MS. ELLIOTT: That letter was waiting for you when you got back to Memphis?

MS. POLK: Yes. In fact, my mother said if she'd known what was in that letter or something she'd steamed it open and thrown it away. (laughter)

MS. ELLIOTT: That's interesting. Did that ranger from Yellowstone keep in contact with you also?

MS. POLK: I don't think so. But Elaine [Elaine de Man, an author currently doing research on Ms. Polk for a book she proposes to write] found some of the letters from him because I couldn't remember his name. I didn't [re-]read the letters and I think she took them with her.

See, when that Bob starts on something it just overpowers anything else what with gifts and flowers and phone calls.

MS. ELLIOTT: So he paid you a great deal of attention that summer?

MS. POLK: Yes, very persistent.

MS. ELLIOTT: How often did he write?

MS. POLK: I don't know. Elaine's got the letters. Then he flew down here a couple of times.



MS. ELLIOTT: When did you first learn that Robert Morgan was going to name his B-17 [bomber] in your honor?

MS. POLK: I don't know whether it was when they were up in Bangor, Maine, or when they went overseas. Because he first was going to call it "Little One."

MS. ELLIOTT: Was there any reason that he was going to call it "Little One"?

MS. POLK: Maybe that's what he called me because I was a teenager at that time. The first thing I knew he had changed it to the Memphis Belle. Like I say, I don't know whether it was in Bangor, Maine, or after he got over in England.

MS. ELLIOTT: When did you first see the plane?

MS. POLK: He flew it down here a couple of times. They had to break it in [and] put a lot of miles on it. So he'd fly down here [from Dow Field in Bangor, Maine] for a weekend. He'd burn out the brakes sometimes so he'd be held over while they fixed the brakes.

MS. ELLIOTT: Would he want to be held over to see you?

MS. POLK: Yes. He did it on purpose.

MS. ELLIOTT: That was flattering also, wasn't it? You were still 19 at this time and being pursued by a young pilot. When did he propose marriage?

MS. POLK: It must have been one of those weekends that he came down here. One weekend he





brought this little sweetheart ring. It was a little gold knot with diamonds in the bow part and [he] gave it to me. My engagement ring he mailed to me.

MS. ELLIOTT: Where was he at the time?

MS. POLK: In Bangor, Maine, getting ready to go overseas.

MS. ELLIOTT: How did you feel about him going overseas?

MS. POLK: The way anybody would feel. I mean the way we all felt.

MS. ELLIOTT: When you met him you knew that he'd be sent overseas?

MS. POLK: Yes, that's right. My brother was in the field artillery. My older brother served in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy. So, everybody seemed touched by the war back then.

MS. ELLIOTT: When Bob first went overseas were people outside your family here in Memphis aware that there was a plane named the Memphis Belle?

MS. POLK: No, the public didn't know it until October or November maybe. If I had my scrapbook I could tell you.

Menno Duerksen was a cub reporter on the Press-Scimitar. Something came over the wire on an air raid over Germany or France about a plane named for a Memphis girl and called the Memphis Belle.

The editor saw that and he told Menno to find that girl. Being majoring in Science I had a Chemistry lab that



afternoon. Menno went down the phone book [through] all the Folks until he found Mother. She was a prissy little old thing. She prissed up and got my picture of Bob and a picture of me and they put it in the Press-Scimitar.

Mother thought that it would be a small, little picture with all the rest of the servicemen. But, no. It was a great big picture with a great big picture of the plane. I think the tail had been shot off, on the front page. Mother was so embarrassed they wouldn't show me the paper.

MS. ELLIOTT: When did you learn of it?

MS. POLK: That evening because I came home and wanted to see the evening paper. They hemmed and hawed around it and everything.

MS. ELLIOTT: So you were surprised also?

MS. POLK: I really was surprised. Then after that I was grateful because whenever they had a write-up about the Memphis Belle I knew that Bob had made a bombing raid and had gotten back successfully.

MS. ELLIOTT: So it was good for you to know that he was okay?

MS. POLK: Yes. He usually sent me a cablegram after every raid but, of course, that took a couple of days. It got more and more frequent coming out in the paper about the bombing raids.

MS. ELLIOTT: Bob Morgan and the other crewmen of the Memphis Belle flew twenty-five missions and I believe that their last mission was in May of 1943.



MS. POLK: No, it was before then I think. Because with the red tape and everything and they got back here in June. Maybe it was in May. Like I say, it's in the book, isn't it? [Ms. Polk indicates a copy of The Memphis Belle, Home at Last by Menno Duerksen that is on the table.]

MS. ELLIOTT: Yes.

MS. POLK: Then it is [May of 1943].

MS. ELLIOTT: When did you learn that a documentary had been made about the Memphis Belle, B-17?

MS. POLK: Now that I don't remember. I do know that when they were going to have the [film's] premiere here in 1944, my mother saw to it that I had gone to California so that I wouldn't be embarrassed by all the publicity. So I wasn't here for the premiere in 1944.

MS. ELLIOTT: In June, after the Belle had been honored and retired from active service, the crew then went on a war bond selling tour. Did the crew stop off in Memphis first?

MS. POLK: Yes. They first landed in Washington and then they came here. From here the crew was given leave and they all went home. When they came back then they took off on that war bond tour.

MS. ELLIOTT: How did you feel about Bob having been away for a number of months overseas and then finally coming back to the United States and then having to go away?



MS. POLK: Well, it was during the war. You just didn't question things like that.

MS. ELLIOTT: It was just his duty.

MS. POLK: Yes. You were grateful that they were home safe and sound.

MS. ELLIOTT: Do you think having a romantic story behind the Memphis Belle was a factor in it being chosen for that tour to sell war bonds?

MS. POLK: I think so. It wasn't going to be the one they were first going to use in the documentary. Eugene O'Neil's, the author's, son or son-in-law was flying a plane and they were using that plane but he got shot down. Then William Wyler found out about the Memphis Belle and liked the romance and all that stuff.

MS. ELLIOTT: William Wyler was the director?

MS. POLK: And he made the movie. He flew on four or five bombing raids. In fact that's why he's deaf from all the machine guns and the ack-ack [noise]. He'd have two cameras. He'd keep one inside of his jacket and when the one he was using froze [due to the high altitude] then he'd switch.

And I think four or five cameramen were killed because they were on other planes making that documentary.

MS. ELLIOTT: When Bob came back to Memphis in June of 1943 did you make any plans then to go through with your engagement?

MS. POLK: Yes, but the War Department really didn't





want us to get married [then]. They wanted to keep the romance. But when I met him up in Cleveland, [Ohio], they wanted me to marry him that night. Whether it was just them cutting up or not, I don't know. They were going to open up a department store and all this other stuff

MS. ELLIOTT: I know the incident you're speaking of.  
The Addressograph-Multigraph Corporation  
[arranged for your visit].

MS. POLK: That's where Bob used to work [before the war]. They had a great big shebang for him and they arranged for my mother and I to fly up there to surprise him.

MS. ELLIOTT: So Bob didn't know you'd be coming?

MS. POLK: I think he really did because he had to straighten up his act when I was coming.  
And that might be why they [the War Department] wanted us to get married because there was so much wine, women and song on that war bond tour.

MS. ELLIOTT: The whole crew were perceived as heroes and I'm sure that attracted --.

MS. POLK: Women. Bob was staying out at my house when they came here and women would call him up out there. They surely would. I'd put him on the phone. I thought it was some mother or sister asking about some loved one and half the time it was women wanting to date him.

MS. ELLIOTT: So you were aware that Bob was very



attractive to other women?

MS. POLK: I didn't think too much about it.

MS. ELLIOTT: When you surprised him in Cleveland, Ohio,  
I believe a picture was taken then and it  
was later on the cover of Life magazine.

MS. POLK: It wasn't on the cover but it was on the  
back page.

MS. ELLIOTT: So you were receiving national attention.  
And this would have been the summer of  
1943?

MS. POLK: No. I cancelled the engagement on his  
birthday, July the 31st. I called him out  
in Denver at the Brown [Palace] Hotel. I think that's right.  
And some woman answered that phone and something went on that  
I didn't particularly like and everything and that was it.  
But the War Department wouldn't let me break the engagement.

MS. ELLIOTT: What do you think their motive was?

MS. POLK: The plane was still on the war bond tour.

MS. ELLIOTT: And this would not have been good  
publicity?

MS. POLK: No, but it leaked out. The War Department  
said "No, you can't break that engagement  
until after the war bond tour."

MS. ELLIOTT: But you and Bob knew then that it was  
probably all over?

MS. POLK: I knew it. You know how twenty year-olds  
are. I don't know whether you thought it



was all over or you thought there'd still be some courting or going back and forth. You know how it was when you were growing up. You'd break up with your boyfriend and wait and see what they were going to do next.

MS. ELLIOTT: After that phone call you were pretty determined that the engagement was over?

MS. POLK: Yes, especially that weekend.

MS. ELLIOTT: Did Bob try to get you back together?

MS. POLK: Yes, he did. I went on back to school. Everytime he came through here I was either at the farm or over at Hot Springs with my father. I really was. Now sometimes he might have come through here and my mother might have told a little white one. But to my knowledge, I'll give her the benefit of the doubt, [I really wasn't here]. She kept us from seeing each other.

MS. ELLIOTT: I imagine that it was hurtful to end the engagement.

MS. POLK: Oh, yes. And then I knew I had to go back to that damn college. That was the crowning blow.

MS. ELLIOTT: You weren't very excited about continuing at Southwestern?

MS. POLK: No, but I knew I had to.

MS. ELLIOTT: Because it was the thing to do, it was expected of you?

MS. POLK: I guess when I didn't get married the thing to do was to go on and finish my education.



MS. ELLIOTT: After this did you receive as much publicity as you had before?

MS. POLK: No. I don't think so. You see he [Bob] got married that December to a girl from Asheville, North Carolina. That's his hometown. He'd met her that summer. She was a hostess out at the country club.

I was trying to think. I don't think that I saw Bob that fall, like I said. I was either at the farm or over at Hot Springs and then I was going to school. We wrote each other letters. I think my mother saw to it that [we didn't see each other] Like, he might have come through and she'd tell him that I was over at the farm.

MS. ELLIOTT: Is this the farm that [your father had]?

MS. POLK: This is the one over in Marianna, Arkansas. Daddy had given the Polk estate to his sisters, the plantation house out in Tennessee. And he took the farm over here in Marianna, Arkansas, some land that he had cleared off.

MS. ELLIOTT: Did you have any problems getting dates after that because everyone knew you as the "Memphis Belle", someone else's girl?

MS. POLK: I really don't remember. Like I say, Southwestern was so small. There really weren't a lot of men left. Most of them had gone to war. I was trying to think. I don't know who I would have been dating.

MS. ELLIOTT: What was the reaction of your classmates at





Southwestern of all the publicity?

MS. POLK: They were real good. I guess they respected what I had gone through. They really didn't tease me. You know, usually they would tease you. But I don't remember them teasing me about that.

MS. ELLIOTT: Was this a positive experience? Was it something that you're glad that happened or something that perhaps you regret?

MS. POLK: I've never looked at it one way or the other. It's just part of living I guess. It's just another phase in your life.

I can think differently now than I thought back there, fifty years ago. I guess I was devastated when it broke up and I really thought that we'd get back together.

MS. ELLIOTT: I'm sure the news of his marriage was a surprise.

MS. POLK: Yes. And right after that he went over to the South Pacific and flew B-29's.

MS. ELLIOTT: So by the end of 1943 you and Bob had gone your separate ways.

MS. POLK: But he wrote me a letter the day that he got married and he didn't mention getting married in that letter. I found out about it later.

MS. ELLIOTT: That's interesting. Do you know where the plane was at this time? As you said Bob was flying a B-29 in the South Pacific.

MS. POLK: I think that they put that plane down in



Florida for training missions out of Tampa.

MS. ELLIOTT: So Bob was in the South Pacific and you were continuing your education at Southwestern and the plane was near McDill Air Force Base at Tampa, Florida. Did you think about the plane anymore?

MS. POLK: Oh, surely you did.

MS. ELLIOTT: As a matter of fact, after the war, the plane came to Memphis.

MS. POLK: When?

MS. ELLIOTT: In 1945, I believe.

MS. POLK: Yes. After they found it in a dump out in Oklahoma, they flew it back. But I was a stewardess on American Airlines then. They didn't consult me.

MS. ELLIOTT: When did you find out that the plane was back in Memphis?

MS. POLK: [I found out] through the paper.

MS. ELLIOTT: Were you glad it was back in Memphis?

MS. POLK: I reckon.

MS. ELLIOTT: How did you feel during the time from 1945 to 1986 when the plane was in several different locations in the city? Was it something that you thought about often?

Ms. POLK: Not much. You see, I was drinking then. That was the beginning of my alcoholism. You just didn't think.

Like when I was flying I thought that I was big stuff



ordering martinis up in New York, at the Algonquin [Hotel], sitting there where all those writers and things used to sit there in the lobby. Then I'd go to a play and I'd fall asleep during the play and I wouldn't know what was going on. So I guess that was the beginning. I had drunk before but I guess it was accumulating with me.

MS. ELLIOTT: While your were working as a stewardess?

MS. POLK: Yes. They [the management of American Airlines] called me down a couple of times when I was taking a flight out. And I'd tell them that I'd been to a wedding.

MS. ELLIOTT: As an explanation for your drinking?

MS. POLK: Yes, for them smelling the alcohol on my breath.

MS. ELLIOTT: How long were you a stewardess?

MS. POLK: About two and half years.

MS. ELLIOTT: What made you decide to stop?

MS. POLK: I think that I got fired. Because after my father died I was thinking about stopping.

I had met this girl out in El Paso, Texas. That was one of my layovers. She asked me to spend the summer with her down at a ranch near Corpus Christi, [Texas]. And I told them [the management of American Airlines] that I had to handle my father's estate, which was a tale.

She had gone down there to interview for a job. When we came back they wanted me to take a trip out. In the meantime, I had gotten drunk out in Texas and called Bob up



at his home. I thought he was coming in so I told them that I couldn't take a trip out.

MS. ELLIOTT: You had arranged to met Bob?

MS. POLK: Yes. I was thinking that he was coming in.

In the meantime, the airline had called home over a five or six dollar expense check that was due me. And Mother told them what a grand time I was having down in Corpus Christi, Texas and down in Beeville, Texas. And they thought I was on serious business.

MS. ELLIOTT: Handling your father's estate?

MS. POLK: Handling my father's estate. (laughter)

MS. ELLIOTT: And they learned otherwise?

MS. POLK: Yes.

MS. ELLIOTT: When you weren't working as a stewardess did you come back to Memphis?

MS. POLK: I was based in Memphis. I flew out of Memphis.

MS. ELLIOTT: After you didn't have that job any longer [what did you do]?

MS. POLK: I concentrated on drinking.

MS. ELLIOTT: When did that change?

MS. POLK: In 1963, the day that I was going to move into this house from the other house on LeMaster, they found me in the bed with my eyes rolled back in a coma.

They took me to the hospital. My brother was coming down and the doctor told him that there was no sense in





coming down. Either she comes out of it or she doesn't and we'll let you know. It was about five days before I came out of it.

So they built me up. They were going to commit me to a sanitarium and then they came to me and told me that I wasn't taking care of my dogs and that's when I agreed to commit myself.

I went to a sanitarium in Arlington, Texas, and stayed 90 days. Then I came home. Even coming from the sanitarium they wouldn't let my brother come bring me home. They said, "either she walks out on her own two feet or she can come back in here."

I just wonder if that's not being protected all of my life and never growing up. I always had my mother and lived at home. If I'd become a stewardess and lived in another town then I would've been on my own. Maybe I would have grown up.

But still everybody in my family except my mother is an alcoholic. I think that it's in the genes. So I would have probably been an alcoholic one way or another.

MS. ELLIOTT:           How did you feel about being in a  
                              sanitarium?   Were you relieved because you  
were receiving help?

MS. POLK: I didn't have any sense. I was hiding my cookies and my candy. They would let me go to the store. I'd buy cookies and candy and I'd hide it like I'd hide my whiskey all through my closet and everything. I



guess I overdo anything I do.

23

Don't give me just give me one piece of candy. That's just a teaser. I'm going to have more. Either I won't take any or I'm going to take more than one.

MS. ELLIOTT: Well, you're smiling right now so you feel comfortable recognizing this about yourself?

MS. POLK: Yes. The only treatment they gave me was becoming a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. I was so dumb. I'm sure I'd heard of it before I went down there. I thought it was an exclusive club. I was going to pay my yearly dues or whatever it was.

To tell you the truth, they had to tell me how to write a check down there. I had forgotten. I told you I had brain damage and liver damage.

MS. ELLIOTT: This was a result of the coma?

MS. POLK: From all that alcohol. And I couldn't walk. If you noticed, every step around here has a rail. I think I had Jake leg. You've never heard of it?

MS. ELLIOTT: No, I haven't it.

MS. POLK: It's something about the nerve endings in your legs. I couldn't step up on anything and I kind of shuffled.

Back then they didn't have a place for alcoholics. It was kind of new. At first, they were going to send me to Menninger's [Clinic in Topeka, Kansas] but Menninger's was



full. [In] this place I went to I don't remember seeing but one other woman there that was an alcoholic. I think that the rest of it was menopausal, change of life women that go berserk.

MS. ELLIOTT: Once you came back to Memphis after the 90 days there did you feel comfortable in a new house and did you feel comfortable with yourself?

MS. POLK: I didn't feel anything. It took me two years to come to the party. I was living in never-never land. I didn't know how to worry about anything. I didn't remember anything but happy things. It really was about two years.

That's when I started swimming a lot to get the use of my legs back. But it takes you that long to get your brain unscrambled.

MS. ELLIOTT: Were you working during this time?

MS. POLK: I didn't have enough sense. I was as happy as a goon.

MS. ELLIOTT: In 1986 the Memphis Belle airplane started receiving a lot of attention again. How did you feel about that?

MS. POLK: I thought it was real good. I felt real happy.

MS. ELLIOTT: For so many years the plane had just been neglected and set out under the weather. Were you called upon to help in the campaign to raise money for the plane's restoration?



MS. POLK: No. I identified myself when they were moving the plane and that's when I started helping them. That was '86 to '87, wasn't it?

MS. ELLIOTT: Yes. There has been a Memphis Belle Memorial Association for quite a while.

MS. POLK: I didn't know anything about that. There was this little old boy that worked for Memphis Light, Gas, & Water. He wanted to start something and I was trying to help him. I didn't know about those other guys. They didn't contact me or anything.

I remember the night before they moved the plane from the [National Guard] armory I sat in this little old boy's pickup truck, talking to this little old boy who was guarding the plane, until 10 or 11 o'clock.

MS. ELLIOTT: About the plane?

MS. POLK: Oh, about life in general. We were just sitting there. The next morning they moved it.

MS. ELLIOTT: And the Memphis Belle airplane today is under a pavilion on Mud Island. [end of side A]

MS. ELLIOTT: We were talking about the plane being on Mud Island. The Memphis Belle airplane was dedicated in it's new pavilion in May of 1987. How did you feel about those ceremonies, and you saw Bob again?

MS. POLK: Oh, he was married. But he and his wife had come and stayed here at the house. In





fact, I had to hitch a ride to get over to the ceremony. I did.

MS. ELLIOTT: How did you feel about that?

MS. POLK: I was mad as hell in a way. I thought now isn't this some can of beans. I had no way to get from that Diane's restaurant.

MS. ELLIOTT: Because so much attention was being paid to Bob and to the plane not only during these dedication ceremonies but even back in 1942, how did you feel?

MS. POLK: I thought that was grand. It didn't bother me [in 1942]. I guess you're so happy that they were back and everything. Like I say, when you're in love, hell, you don't think. Nothing bothers you.

MS. ELLIOTT: How do you feel about the plane being restored?

MS. POLK: I think it's wonderful. And I like to see these young kids and these veterans.

Because you go down and look at the plane and it brings back memories. It does for them and for these kids to be interested in it and for a lot of people their daddy was a pilot or something. [telephone rings and recorder was turned off for approximately two minutes.]

MS. ELLIOTT: How much of an effect do you think being the "Memphis Belle" has played on your life?

MS. POLK: I don't think really any. They kind of kid



me up at the Woman's Exchange. They say, "Hey, you Belle." And it has given me something to do in my old age.

But you know it's a strain on you trying to remember people's names and something about them and being nice and smiling all the time. It's enough to get your goat. Like I was telling my niece, I've lost five pounds. Everytime I do anything connected with the Memphis Belle I lose two or three pounds, in the nerves I'd guess you'd say. Because you don't want to hurt anybody's feelings and you try to act intelligent.

And I'm pretty bad with names to begin with and I know people like to be recognized by their names. You have to put forth a little effort and I'm not used to thinking.

MS. ELLIOTT: Your involvement with the Belle, why do you think you do it?

MS. POLK: One thing [is because] they ask me to.

And everybody seems to want an autograph. There's nothing to exert yourself a little bit and be kind to people. I learned in A.A. [Alcoholics Anonymous] that the more you give the more you receive. When you give you've got a void and when you've got a void something's going to come back in there.

MS. ELLIOTT: Do you think the publicity over the Belle and the war bond selling tour effected your relationship with Bob Morgan?

MS. POLK: Yes. Like I said, all that wine, women,



and song. And then my being young and his being young too. Yes, it did.

MS. ELLIOTT: How does it feel to be such a part of history and especially Memphis history?

MS. POLK: Well, I wasn't conscious of that because I go my own slap happy way. Like I say, the about that dance last Saturday night, they didn't let me know until about five-thirty or six o'clock that they were going to have it indoors. And I didn't know anybody that would take me.

MS. ELLIOTT: You're referring to the Memphis Belle [Memorial Association] dance that was held at Mud Island.

MS. POLK: Yes, last Saturday. And they let me know something after the fact. I heard that dance wasn't any good, did you go?

MS. ELLIOTT: No, ma'am. I did not.

MS. POLK: It was terrible. (laughter) You can't plan a dance in two weeks. I don't know why they thought they could. It's unbelievable and to have an orchestra in Harbor Landing [restaurant]. You couldn't even hear yourself think they said.

MS. ELLIOTT: Who planned the dance?

MS. POLK: Harry Freidman [board member of the Memphis Belle Memorial Association], I guess. Because Frank [Donofrio, president of the Memphis Belle Memorial Association] called me and said something to



me [about the dance]. I told Frank, "Ya'll have about lost your ever loving mind. There's no way."

MS. ELLIOTT: When you are not involved with activities about the Memphis Belle what are you involved in?

MS. POLK: I play bridge every other week. I was playing every week but I fell out with one of the members of the bridge club. I wasn't going to play at all because I'll be damned if I play cards with her. She's a poor sport. We've had two run-ins with her. My mother always said the first time something happens it's their fault and the second time something happens it's your fault. So I'm not going to let the third time occur.

And then I do substitute work at the Woman's Exchange. Outside of that I piddle around in the neighborhood and read books.

(At the request of the interviewee, 120 seconds of tape have been erased.)

MS. ELLIOTT: Is there anything that you would like to add to this history of the Memphis Belle?

MS. POLK: No. If you ask the questions I'll answer it and try not to digress. I digress.

MS. ELLIOTT: I'd like to thank you. This will serve as an interesting history of the plane.







